

Top 15 Myths about Exam Study

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What is a Myth?

The dictionary definition is:

'A belief or idea that is widely held, but which is false.'

The difficulty with revision myths is that sometimes there is a grain of truth in them, but mostly they are wrong. And the danger you face if you believe all of them is that you will risk not getting top grades.

So, let's examine some of these myths.

1. My friend didn't do any revision, and she did very well.

Very occasionally you will come across someone who has a photographic memory and can recall everything they have ever read or seen. Note the words 'very occasionally'. It is more likely that the friend revised throughout the course. Maybe she took the time to re-read her notes regularly, maybe she did practice questions, made summaries of her notes throughout the course. Then it might appear she didn't do any revision because it had been ongoing throughout.

And maybe she lied because she thought it wasn't cool to be thought of as a swot!

2. I don't need a timetable for revision. I'll do it when I feel like it.

There are several problems with this. If you don't have a timetable you run the risk of running out of time because you haven't planned exactly what you have to do. Secondly, you waste time when you do start to revise by having to decide what to do. Thirdly, your exams are too important to leave revision to chance.

Having a timetable means you can organise your time to spend more on your weaker subjects. Plan it so that you don't have all your weak subjects on the same day! And stick to your plan – **it will make you feel good.**



In the lead-up to exams a typical revision timetable would include 15 to 20 hours per week of revision. Once you have your exam timetable you can organise the subjects to make sure you are using your time sensibly. And you might find it easier if you don't spend too long in any session on one subject. Research has shown that studying several subjects in one session leaves a deeper impression on the brain.

But don't forget to build in some **relaxation time** and regular breaks, including some fun activities (this is not part of your 15 to 20 hours!). You cannot revise all day, every day; your brain needs time to recover.

3. If I start revising too early, I'll forget it all before the exam.

Yes, it sounds like an excuse, doesn't it? And that's because it is. The more times you revise a topic, the better. Your brain is quite capable of remembering the information and you'll find that, when you revisit a topic, you haven't forgotten it at all. It just needed a little prompt to bring it back to the front of your mind.

4. All you need to do is to go through your notes and highlight the important ideas.

Yes, there is a grain of truth in this one. Highlighting important ideas can help you to organise your notes, **but it is no substitute for actual revision**. Revision has to be active. In other words, your brain has to work. If you highlight important ideas in your notes early in your revision schedule, when you go through your notes later, the highlighting should stimulate your brain to recall the detail, **but only** if you have taken the trouble to learn it in the first place.

5. The more time you spend revising, the better you will do.

Again, there is a grain of truth here but remember the saying 'It is not the **quantity** but the **quality** that matters'. If you spend all your revision time just reading your notes you are not really engaging your brain. This is called passive learning. Yes, some of what you read will enter your memory, but it is a terribly inefficient way of working. If, instead, you condense your notes into a short summary, test yourself, or pair up with a friend to test each other you will find that more of it sticks in your memory. This is **active learning**.



6. I'm no good at exams, so why bother revising?

Again, this is obviously an excuse given by someone who just can't be bothered. It's true some people find exams easier than others but that can be for a number of reasons. Maybe they've taken the time to revise and are well-prepared. Maybe they're less stressed by the whole process. Maybe they've been practising exam questions and reading examiners' reports and know what to expect.

But **YOU** can do this as well. You just have to get yourself organised. And think how good you'll feel when you get decent grades for that little bit of effort.

7. All exams are different. Why waste time going over past papers?

Yes, exams are different but, as there are only so many topics to be covered, questions are often similar from year to year. And if you read examiners' reports as well, you'll discover what mistakes previous students have made, what earned marks and what didn't. This is a great way to improve your chances.

8. I don't want to get top grades and be labelled a swot – they are boring and never have any fun!

Yet another excuse for not working! The most successful people work hard **and** play hard.

9. I've heard you can revise by audio recording all your notes and playing them back while you sleep!

The theory is that this is subliminal revision. In other words, as you sleep your brain stores the information it receives from the audio recording. Unfortunately, there are no studies to prove this works, and it seems a bit foolhardy to risk your results like this, doesn't it?



10. I study better at the last minute when I am under pressure.

This might be an excuse from someone who has failed to start work early enough, or, more worryingly, it might be something that person truly believes.

Whatever the explanation, this is just **not true**. If you leave things to the last minute there will be a sense of panic and that will impact on your ability to study effectively. If you need the motivation of a deadline before you can get started, then set yourself a fake deadline a day, a week, a month before the actual deadline, and work to that fake deadline instead.

11. Why do I need to make notes, when they are all in my textbook?

Yes, but have you memorised everything in your textbook? This is extremely unlikely! Again, reading your textbook is passive learning which is less effective than active learning. Using a textbook to supplement and understand what has been taught in a lesson is a good idea, but there is no substitute for making your own notes. Aim to make them concise, organised and helpful. Creating flashcards with the title of a topic on one side and a brief summary on the other is a useful aid to revision.

12. Because I don't have anywhere to study, I can't revise properly.

Again, there is a grain of truth here as it is important to have somewhere to work. However, revision can be done anywhere and at any time. In fact, studies have shown that varying the location of revision actually helps memory retention.

Work out what you need in the way of location, whether that is somewhere quiet, somewhere comfortable, somewhere warm, and take the notes you have prepared and settle down to revise.

13. It's all right for everyone else, they're clever. I can't compete with them.

This is a rather defeatist statement and suggests you can't teach an old dog new tricks. If you work out your learning style, and what study techniques will be most effective for you, you will be amazed by how much you can achieve.



14. Cramming never works.

Many successful students will tell you that they have been saved by a spot of last-minute revision which has helped them to answer a particular question in an exam. So, yes, cramming, in that sense, does work, **although it is not a substitute for proper long-term revision.** You can never properly revise a whole subject in the final 24 hours before an exam, but, if you haven't done **any** revision, go ahead and cram!

15. I can't afford to take time off when I'm revising.

You **MUST** take time off when revising. You need to vary your activities between revising, relaxing, exercise, having fresh air and having fun! Oh, and eating and sleeping, of course. If you don't, you will be working inefficiently and wasting your time.



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